

# **Bonneville Salt Flats FAQs**

**1. What are the Bonneville Salt Flats?** Managed by the Bureau of Land Management as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern and Special Recreation Management Area, the Bonneville Salt Flats are a 30,000 acre expanse of hard, white salt crust on the western edge of the Great Salt Lake basin in Utah. The flats are about 12 miles long and 5 miles wide with total area coverage of just over 46 square miles. Near the center of the salt, the crust is almost 5 feet thick in places, with the depth tapering off to less than 1 inch as you get to the edges. Total salt crust volume has been estimated at 147 million tons or 99 million cubic yards of salt! The Bonneville Salt Flats are comprised of approximately 90% common table salt.

**2. How are they formed?** The formation of the Salt Flats began at the end of the last Ice Age, when the waters of ancient Lake Bonneville began to recede. Lake Bonneville covered approx. 2/3 of Utah and was almost 1000 feet deep in the area of the Salt Flats. When this large amount of fresh water slowly disappeared over time, large concentrations of dissolved minerals were deposited in the soils that form the watershed for the Bonneville Salt Flats. These minerals include gypsum (commercially used to make household wallboard) and halite (common table salt). Potassium and magnesium are also present in smaller concentrations.

Today, ground water slowly flows towards the Salt Flats from the surrounding watershed, picks up dissolved minerals along the way, and percolates up to the surface via a shallow brine aquifer. When temperatures rise in the late spring and summer months, the salty water rapidly evaporates in the heat, and the minerals are left behind to form the salt crust. During the cooler months of the year (November to May), evaporation slows down and the ground water floods the Salt Flats several inches deep. Wind, periodic rainstorms, and regional climate also play an important part in changing salt crust conditions throughout each year.

**3. How did they get the name "Bonneville"?** During the fur trapping era of the 1820-30s, numerous fur trading companies operated in the area of Utah. In 1833, trapper, trader, explorer, and legendary frontiersman Joseph R. Walker mapped and explored the area around the Great Salt Lake and crossed the northern perimeter of the Salt Flats while working for a fur trading company run by Captain Benjamin L. E. Bonneville. In those days, it was common for fur trappers to name significant landmarks after their employers, perhaps in an effort to gain favor or better wages. It is from Benjamin Bonneville that the Salt Flats and ancient lake derive their name, although there is no historical record to show that Bonneville himself ever saw the area that bears his name.

**4. What is the history of the area?** Before Joe Walker, fellow trapper and frontier explorer Jedediah Smith was perhaps the first white man to cross the Salt Flats in 1827 while returning from his first expedition to California. Before then, Native Americans throughout the region were familiar with the desert region west of the Great Salt Lake and informed white explorers of what was there. In 1845, John C. Fremont and his U.S. government-sponsored exploratory expedition crossed through the very heart of the Salt

flats in an effort to find a shorter overland route to the Pacific. In the following year, Fremont's route across the flats would come to be known as the Hastings Cutoff route along the California Trail.

Promoted by Lansford Hastings as a faster and easier route to California, the Hastings Cutoff proved to be just the opposite for the ill-fated Donner-Reed party of 1846. A factor contributing to the Donner-Reed tragedy in the Sierra Nevadas was the delay the party experienced on the Salt Flats when their wagons became mired in the mud found just below the thin salt crust. Abandoned wagon parts from the party were present on the flats well into the 1930s, and the wheel tracks from their wagons are still visible today at certain points along the trail. The tragedy of the Donner-Reed Party limited extensive use of the Hastings Cutoff as an overland migration trail. However, today it is part of the federally protected California National Historic Trail.

Early attempts to promote automobile racing on the Salt Flats failed until the 1930s when Ab Jenkins, a Utah native driving a Studebaker dubbed the Mormon Meteor, began setting endurance speed records at Bonneville. Jenkins was later instrumental in promoting landspeed racing and luring British racing legend Sir Malcolm Campbell to the Salt Flats in 1935. Since that time the Bonneville Salt Flats have attracted racers from throughout the world and have become the site of numerous land speed records. Their attraction for these racers is due to the hard, flat surface that is continually renewed by nature each year.

Some of the astounding landspeed records established at Bonneville over the decades:

- 1914: Teddy Tetzlaff, *Blitzen Benz*, 141.73 mph (unofficial), piston
- 1935: Sir Malcolm Campbell, *Bluebird*, 301.126 mph, piston
- 1940: Ab Jenkins, *Mormon Meteor III*, 161.180 mph, 24 hr endurance run, piston
- 1947: John Cobb, *Railton Mobil Special*, 394.194 mph, piston
- 1964: Craig Breedlove, *Spirit of America*, 526.277 mph, jet
- 1965: Craig Breedlove, *Spirit of America*, 600.601 mph, jet
- 1967: Burt Munro, *Munro Special*, 183.586 mph, 1920 Indian Scout motorcycle
- 1970: Gary Gabolich, *Blue Flame*, 622.407 mph, rocket
- 2001: Don Vesco, *Turbinator*, 458.440 mph, turbine
- 2006: Chris Carr, *BUB Streamliner*, 350.884 mph, motorcycle
- 2006: Andy Green, *JCB Dieselmax*, 350.092 mph, diesel

**5. What happens there today?** Each summer, professional and amateur teams from around the world compete for landspeed records in different vehicle classes at annual events such as Speedweek, held each August since 1949. Racetracks are surveyed and prepared with heavy drag sleds that smooth out the surface of the salt. In addition to landspeed racing, the Utah Rocket Club and the National Archery Association hold events each year. Beyond recreation, the Bonneville Salt Flats have become internationally renowned as a unique backdrop for filming major motion pictures, fashion layouts, and automobile commercials. The BLM usually issues over 20 commercial film permits at Bonneville each year.

**6. When is it open to the public?** The Bonneville Salt Flats are free and open to the public most of the year. During landspeed racing events and/or filming projects, special security restrictions may be required to maintain public safety. See below for details. If you go out onto the salt flats on your own, let someone know where you are and when you plan to return. Getting stuck out alone on the flats is dangerous and has resulted in past fatalities. If you do decide to travel off the access road, please review and adhere to the attached BSF Travel Advisory.

**7. What do I need to know about attending racing or other events at Bonneville?**

The public can gain access to landspeed racing events by paying an entrance fee and following route markers onto the salt to designated viewing areas. Reservations for spectators are not required. If you are a racer, you must pre-register for the event. Racing commentary and results are broadcast over FM/AM radio. Portable shade shelters, umbrellas, lawn chairs, wide-brimmed hats, sunscreen, and lots of water are recommended. Bicycles, motorcycles, and ATVs are permitted on the salt. For more information, please refer to the attached Schedule of Events and related websites.

**8. What facilities are available?** Toilets, food, beverages, and souvenirs are available at most recreation events. At all other times of the year, there are no facilities available at Bonneville. Once you go from the access road onto the salt flats, there are no surface improvements or signs. You are on your own. Food, fuel, lodging, and other services are available at the freeway exit truck stop or in the nearby town of Wendover. Hotel reservations for major racing events usually need to be made months in advance. See the attached Wendover Lodging and Services.

**9. Do cell phones work there?** Yes, cell phones will work in the area. Coverage is generally good closer to the access road and Wendover. Service becomes weaker the farther away from the freeway you travel.

**10. What about overnight camping?** To maintain public health & safety and protect natural resources, overnight camping is prohibited on the salt flats. There are no developed campground facilities. You may camp for free on adjacent public lands accessed via local roads. During landspeed racing events, many participants choose to camp on the mud flats off of the access road to Bonneville or along the nearby Silver Island Mountains backcountry byway. Please refer to the enclosed map. RV camping facilities are available in nearby Wendover.

**11. How do I get there?** The Bonneville Salt Flats are located just off of Exit 4 on Interstate 80 in Utah, just before reaching the Nevada state line. They are approximately 100 miles and 1.5 hours driving time due west of Salt Lake City. After exiting the freeway, turn right and drive north past the truck stop. Stay on the paved road as it curves to the right away from the mountains and heads east out across the mud flats. In just over 4 miles, you will come to a cul-de-sac at the end of the pavement where a BLM sign is located. You may park here or continue onto the Salt Flats. ***Travel on the Salt Flats is at your own risk.*** If you do decide to travel off the access road, please review and adhere to the attached BSF Travel Advisory.

**12. Is it safe to drive on the salt flats?** When the salt flats are dry, it is generally safe to drive on them. Try not to go within 100 yards of the edge of the salt crust as you may get stuck in the underlying mud. Salt residue will usually get onto the underside of your car but is easily washed off with fresh water. You must make sure to thoroughly wash your car (especially the undercarriage) to avoid corrosion problems later. When the salt flats are flooded, you should not drive on them unless you are thoroughly familiar with the area and take special precautions. For more details, please see the attached BSF Travel Advisory.

**13. What's the weather like?** Daytime temperatures can range from below freezing in winter to triple digits in the summer. Average highs in July, August, and September are usually in the mid to upper 90s. Early spring and late fall can see highs in the 50s and 60s. Late spring and early fall temps are usually in the 70s and 80s. Strong winds and thunderstorms often occur in the afternoons during warm weather months. Ultraviolet solar radiation can be intense on hot, sunny days. Visitors need to come prepared with protective clothing such as broad-brimmed hats, UV sunglasses, high-SPF sunscreen, shelter from the sun, and lots of water. Dehydration and heat exhaustion are real dangers in the summer.

**14. When do I need a permit?** If you are there during a recreation event or filming project, you may need to pay an entrance fee and/or adhere to specific security restrictions. If you arrive when there are no events occurring and want to take personal photos, view the area, and/or drive on the salt, you do not need to get a permit or pay fees. You do need to obtain a permit from the BLM Salt Lake Field Office if you are planning an organized group event or any type of commercial filming at Bonneville Salt Flats. Special permit fees will usually be required. For more details, contact the BLM at 801-977-4300.